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ABSTRACT

A study examined "Learning Community" meetings at the College of Education and Human Services at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh in which professors, inservice teachers, and preservice teachers in a 12-hour semester block connected with a clinical field experience met and engage in dialogue about the program. A total of four Learning community meetings were tape recorded and transcribed. Results indicated that (1) in three of the four meetings, all voices were heard to some degree, but the voice of the professor was overrepresented at all meetings; (2) the meetings focused on taking care of the business of the learning community--its potential use as a vehicle for collaborative study and research never really materialized; and (3) the preservice teachers valued the field experiences. Findings suggest a dilemma--as preservice and inservice teachers become co-contributors to learning communities, their voices will grow stronger. How will teacher educators honor preservice teachers' voices without losing their own? (RS)

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MULTIPLE METHODOLOGIES FOR SELF STUDY IN LITERACY TEACHER EDUCATION

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ARE YOU LISTENING? HONORING THE VOICES OF PRESERVICE AND INSERVICE TEACHERS IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY

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The Context

During the 1992-93 school year, the College of Education and Human Services at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh moved toward connecting and contextualizing the methods instruction which formed the core of the Professional Education Program in teacher education. What had been stand-alone methods courses in the subjects areas of language arts, reading, social studies and science would become a fifteen-hour semester block connected with a clinical field experience for preservice teachers. The block would be offered to a cohort group of students who would enroll in all courses and be assigned with partners to clinical classrooms. Students would be on campus to receive methods four days a week (one morning for each of the four courses). At four points during the semester, classes would be suspended and students would be off-campus working in their clinical classrooms. Method instructors would teach their individual methods courses and would be assigned to supervise one-fourth of the students as they worked in their clinical classrooms. While falling a bit short of a truly integrative learning experience, it was a first attempt to make methods courses more closely connected with each other and more directly linked to the field. For the first time, methods courses were being taught by instructors who met on a regular basis to discuss their instruction. For the first time, methods instruction would be contextualized by concurrent classroom assignments. For the first time, students would enroll as cohort groups.

With an approved competitive system-wide grant to improve undergraduate teaching, the program was piloted during the 1993-94 school year. The program has since evolved into two separate blocks. Reading, social studies and science methods are taken in one block with a clinical field experience. Educational psychology, and math and language arts methods form the other block. The basic components of the pilot program have been adjusted, but the goal of connecting and contextualizing learning for cohort groups of students is still in place after five semesters. Four cohort groups of students (two in each block) are enrolled each semester.

From the onset, the block was envisioned as a learning community, in which all parties involved became responsible for guiding the program. It was designed to honor the voices of preservice teachers enrolled in the program and inservice teachers serving as cooperating teachers for the clinical experiences. It was hoped that all parties -- professors, teachers and students -- would learn from one another improving the experience for all involved. To achieve these goals, regularly scheduled community meetings were built into the program. The program was launched with a retreat in which faculty members and cooperating teachers worked together to outline the experience. Faculty members talked about the courses they would teach and cooperating teachers talked about the classrooms in which the students would work. Schedules were coordinated. Expectations were discussed. Much time was spent fostering the relationships between the professors and the teachers to begin to build a sense of community. A similar retreat was held at midyear to take stock of where we had been and where we were headed.

Time was also built into the semester schedule for professors, inservice teachers and preservice teachers to meet and engage in dialogue about the program. Initially, Friday mornings were set aside (except during the weeks students were in the schools or calendar conflicts interfered.) These two-hour meetings became known as Learning Community meetings. The involved professors attended the meetings as often as they could. Cooperating teachers were represented on a rotating basis by one or two teachers from their buildings also involved with the learning community program. (Grant money was used to hire substitutes who could relieve classroom teachers of their classroom duties so they could attend the meetings.) Students signed

up to represent their cohort groups at the meetings. Students were expected to attend at least one meeting during the semester. This meant that at anyone meeting, all facets of the learning community would be represented: the university, the public schools and the students. Meetings were usually held on campus. They were facilitated by a faculty member who served as the program coordinator, but was not involved in the teaching of the courses.

Learning Community meetings were envisioned as a place where learning could take place, but often were focused on taking care of the business of the learning community. They were informal discussions usually moderated by the program coordinator in the initial year. No formal agenda was used to outline the meeting, but typically faculty members met before the meeting to discuss whether there were any issues which needed to surface at the meeting. Teacher and student representatives were encouraged to do the same. The meetings usually began with introductions followed by a round-robin opportunity for each member in attendance to share any concerns they had. As the program has evolved, the need for the meetings has been reduced somewhat by the continued involvement of cooperating teachers and faculty members. Securing release time for teachers became more difficult so some meetings were scheduled after school and located in school sites.

The Study

The Learning Community concept was committed to honoring the voices of the preservice and inservice teachers as decisions were made about the teacher preparation program. On four separate occasions, it was decided that the Learning Community meetings would be tape recorded. This was done with the intent of analyzing the interactions at a later date. All four tape-recorded sessions were transcribed. The transcripts provided data for potentially answering three critical questions. Were all voices being heard during the Learning Community meetings? What did the community talk about? And what were the voices of preservice and inservice teachers specifically telling us about our teacher preparation program?

To answer the first question, quantitative analysis was completed with each of the transcripts. For each person involved in the conversation, turn-taking was investigated by counting the total number of comments (turns taken). This was broken down into number of self-initiated comments and number of comments made in response to the group leader. To provide a more complete picture of who spoke during the meetings, the number of transcripted lines of dialogue was also analyzed. For each person, the total number of lines of the transcript was recorded and the average number of lines per comment. Since much of the conversation included relatively short comments, an attempt was made to determine the amount of extended conversation voiced by each person. This was determined by listening to the tape and tallying how many comments lasted more than 30 seconds and estimating how much time was consumed by each speaker during those extended comments. To compare the strengths of the voices of the three groups involved in the meetings (professors, students and cooperating teachers), cumulative totals were computed for each group at each meeting. These results were then totaled to provide a profile of each group over the course of four community meetings. These meetings took place in the spring near the end of the semester which was the end of year one of the pilot program. Students were from the second cohort group enrolled in the program.

Who Talked?

April 15, 1994

A closer examination of each transcript provided insights into the nature of the community conversations. On April 15, 1994, eleven people attended the community meeting: the group facilitator, four professors and one university supervisor (invited as a guest), two cooperating teachers and three students. In comparing the professors (without the group facilitator), teachers and students, four dominant voices were heard: three professors and one teacher. Professor A had 71 turns in the conversation (269 lines in the transcript) and had extended conversation totaling almost 13 minutes. Professor B had 72 turns in the conversation (185 lines in the transcript) and five minutes of extended conversation. Professor C had 70 turns in the conversation (137 lines in the transcript) and two minutes of extended conversation. Teacher A had 62 turns in the conversation (131 lines in the transcript) and four minutes of extended conversation. Voices were heard less frequently from the other professor and classroom teacher, though both made longer comments when they spoke. Professor D had 19 turns in the conversation (60 lines in the transcript) but had four minutes of extended conversation. Teacher B had 29 turns in the conversation but 161 lines in the transcript and seven minutes of extended conversation. By comparison, two of the students also provided fairly moderate voices. Student A had 40 turns in the conversation (99 lines in the transcript) and four minutes of extended conversation. Student B had 34 turns (99 lines) and five minutes of extended conversation. One student voice was not as strong. Student C had eight turns in the conversation (15 lines in the transcript) and no elongated responses.

Proportionally, the professors accounted for 44% of the group but had 56% (232) of turns to talk during the conversation. This was also reflected in analysis of the lines in the transcript (651 lines -- 56% of total). This did not include the voice of the group facilitator and special guest who also represented the university at the meeting. The teachers represented 22% of the group and had 24% (97) of the turns and 25% (292) of the lines in the transcript. The students represented 33% of the group, but only took 20% (82) of the turns and had 18% (213) of the lines in the transcript. Sixty-eight percent of the extended conversation was from the professors. Teachers had 22% of the conversation and students only 10%.

April 22, 1995

On April 22, 1994, the Learning Community met again. Nine people were at the meeting including the group facilitator, three professors, two cooperating teachers and three students. The most dominant voice in terms of turn-taking was a cooperating teacher. Cooperating Teacher C had 203 turns (412 lines in the transcript). The most dominant voice in terms of extended conversation was Professor A who spoke for eight minutes in 65 turns (202 lines). The other professors were also strong voices. Professor B had 159 turns (224 lines) and spoke for 3.5 minutes. Professor C had 135 turns (250 lines) and spoke for three minutes. There was also one fairly strong student voice. Student D had 73 turns (109) lines, but spoke for less than one minute. The other voices were less strong. Cooperating Teacher D had 36 turns (50 lines) and spoke for less than a minute. Student E had 25 turns (60 lines) and spoke for less than one minute. Student F had a similar profile taking 32 turns (55 lines) and speaking for less than one minute.

Proportionally, the professors were 38% of the group. They had 49% (349) of the turns, accounted for 50% (676) of the lines in the transcript and used 71% (14.5 minutes) of the time in extended conversation. The cooperating teachers 25% of the group and had 33% (239) of the

turns, 34% (462) of the lines and 29% (six minutes) of the time. Students, representing 38% of the group, had 18% (130) of the turns, 16% (224) of the lines and 15% (three minutes) of the time.

April 29, 1994

On April 29, 1994, the Learning Community met again. Ten people were at the meeting including the group facilitator, three professors, three cooperating teachers and three students. During this meeting the most dominant voice was one of the cooperating teachers. Teacher H had 170 turns in the conversation (277 lines in the transcript) and spoke for four minutes. The professors had strong roles during the conversation. Professor A had 85 turns in the conversation (189 lines in the transcript) and spoke for seven minutes. Professor B had 68 turns in the conversation (105 lines in the transcript) and spoke for two minutes. Professor D had 60 turns in the conversation (93 lines in the transcript) and spoke for three minutes. Cooperating Teacher G provided a more moderate voice with 53 turns in the conversation (66 lines in the transcript), but less than one minute of extended conversation. Student voices were not as strong. Student G had 32 turns (50 lines) and spoke for less than a minute. Student H had 30 turns (45 lines) and spoke for less than a minute as well. Cooperating teacher F was very quiet (10 turns, 21 lines, less than one minute) as was Student I (13 turns, 25 lines and less than one minute).

Proportionally, each group represented 33% of the participants. Analysis of turn taking revealed that the professors had 41% (213) of the turns and the teachers had 45% (232). The students had only 14% (75) of the turns. Transcript analysis revealed that the professors had 44% (387) of the lines and the teachers had 42% (364). The students had only 14% (120). In extended conversation, the professors used 58% (11 minutes) of the time. Teachers had 26% (five minutes) of the time and students had 16% (three minutes).

May 13, 1994

The final transcribed meeting took place on May 13, 1994. This was during the final week of the semester and followed a week when the students had been in their classrooms. There were eight people at the meeting including the group facilitator, four professors, two cooperating teachers and one student. The dominant voices during this conversation were the professors. Professor A had 242 turns in the conversation (415 lines in the transcript) and spoke for four minutes. Professor C had 220 turns in the conversation (368 lines) and spoke for six minutes. The cooperating teachers' voices were also strong. Cooperating Teacher I had 155 turns (198 lines) and spoke for two minutes. Cooperating Teacher D was back for a second meeting and had 108 turns (236 lines) and spoke for three minutes. Two professors were somewhat quieter. Professor B had 35 turns (60 lines) and spoke for less than one minute. Professor D had 32 turns (44 lines) and spoke for less than one minute. The single student voice (Student J) was virtually missing taking 10 turns (12 lines) and no extended conversation.

Proportionally, the professors comprised 57% of the group. They had 66% (529) of the turns in the conversation which was also reflected in the transcripts accounting for 66% (887) of the lines. They spoke for 70% (12 minutes) of the time. The cooperating teachers represented 29% of the group and had 33% (263) of the turns and 33% (437) of the lines. They spoke for 29% (five minutes) of the time. The single student represented 14% of the group but had only 1% of the turns, 1% of the lines and no extended conversation.

Profile of Four Meetings

When analyzing all four conversations, the professors accounted for 51% of the voices at the community meetings. They had 54% (1323) of the turns to speak during the conversation. Their conversation accounted for 55% (2601) of the lines of dialogue in the transcript. Of the time devoted to extended conversation, professors accounted for 65% (73.5 minutes) of the total time. The cooperating teachers accounted for 23% of the voices at the community meetings. They had 34% (831) of the turns in the conversations and accounted 33% (1555) of the lines of dialogue in the transcript. They accounted for 25% (28 minutes) of the extended conversation time. The students represented 26% of the voices at the community meetings. They had 12% (297) of the turns in the conversation and accounted for 12% (569) of the lines of dialogue. Of the extended conversation time, they were responsible for 10% (11 minutes) of the time.

Discussion

In three out of the four meetings transcribed, it could be argued that all voices -- those of the professors, cooperating teachers and students -- were heard to some degree. (In the four meetings it was clear that the single student did not offer a strong student voice.) It could also be argued that the degree of those voices did vary. Proportionally over time, the professors' voices and the cooperating teachers' voices were heard more strongly than the students' voices. On all measures, the student voice seemed to be under represented at each meeting. The cooperating teacher voice as measured by turn-taking and lines of dialogue was over represented at three meetings and appropriate at one meeting. The cooperating teacher voice as measured by extended conversation was appropriate at three meetings and under represented at one. The cooperating teachers' voices varied quite a bit. Two meetings involved particularly strong voices by cooperating teachers. On all measures, the professor voice seemed to be over represented at all meetings. This was particularly true when measured by the extended time criteria.

If all parties are to become co-contributors to the learning community, it would seem that all voices need to be heard. In analyzing this meeting structure, it was clear that all parties were not equal contributors. As a vehicle, it provided students and cooperating teachers with more voice than past efforts, but the predominant voice we seemed to hear when we invited others in to talk is our own. Contributing to that may be the structure of the meeting -- less formal, no agenda, no real expectation that everyone would bring something to the table. It may be the way the meeting was facilitated -- greater need to monitor voices, draw in those not being heard, tuning down those that have been heard. But I also suspect that it is in part due to inherent power relationships which exist when professors, teachers and students meet even under the auspices of a learning community concept. This may be particularly true for students who are asked to be co-contributors with partners who still control many aspects of the experience.

What Did We Talk About?

April 15, 1994

Content analysis was completed by outlining the topic flow in the conversation in reviewing the transcript for each meeting. During the April 15 meeting, seven issues surfaced. The issue of time in the schools was discussed. Clinician voiced an interest in having more time in the schools. Teachers voiced concern about the amount of time they have to help clinicians. This led to the topic of professional development schools discussing how they worked, whether they could work here and what was being done at the University of Wisconsin. The third topic was focused

on the students' third week of their field experience. Students were invited to talk about how it was progressing. The value of the methods instruction and changes planned for next year also surfaced. The fourth topic was partnerships in the clinical experience with questions about how partners were selected and how to improve relationships between partners. The fifth discussion focused on things not taught in the methods classes: discipline, general routines of teaching, questioning strategies, assessment, etc. It was suggested that perhaps group meetings at the schools might be a way to further address these issues. The sixth topic was related to cooperating teacher involvement next year. Concerns about burn out led to a discussion about what could be done from the university's perspective to help out. The final topic was a discussion of the thematic units and how they will work during the fourth week of the field experience.

April 22, 1995

At this meeting, the students came with a Learning Community tree on which individuals had added leaves with goals written on them. Members attending the meeting added leaves at the end of the meeting. The first topic of discussion was the social studies research paper. Students were concerned about the due date (not enough time between the research paper and the thematic unit) and a discussion of flexible deadlines followed. The second topic was the thematic unit. Concerns were surfaced about how much time would be spent teaching and how much letting go the cooperating teacher would do. Concerns were also surfaced about the need for more planning time and more discussion of where to find ideas. The third topic seemed to focus on learning through teaching. Conversations included talk about learning from mistakes, not having to be perfect, the transition from weeks 1-4, the importance of feedback. A comparison of this clinical experience to others was discussed and longitudinal study of students was suggested. Cooperating teacher concerns were the fourth area of focus. Incentives for teachers working with clinicians were discussed (credits for school, clinicians for aid work, research support). Concerns about next year's clinical were discussed. Professor concerns were surfaced at the end. Thematic units were discussed further by one professor. Another offered an invitation to collaborate on a conference proposal/ article. The group facilitator presented ideas for a faculty college in the fall to share ideas with other universities.

April 29, 1994

This meeting focused on two topics: thematic units and the prospectus for the new clinical block. Discussions about thematic units provided students an opportunity to tell what they were planning to do and to surface any concerns they had about implementing the thematic units during the fourth week of the field experience. The second discussion was planning for 1994-95. The concept for the new clinical block was presented, identifying which school sites were involved, what classes would be involved, scheduling logistics, how schools would be solicited, when students would be in the schools, and the need for a retreat. Proposals for a convention were shared at the end of the discussion.

May 13, 1994

This meeting began with a general discussion of the end of the semester party held the night before at which faculty and students attended. There was a conversation about teaching in Texas. The discussion was eventually directed toward the topic of next year's clinical block with an explanation of how it will work, differences between it and the current block, supervision

concerns, the role of Educational Psychology, the gap between clinical and student teaching and splitting clinicians up between schools. This meeting ended with a conversation between professors after the cooperating teachers and student had left.

Discussion

The Learning Community meetings were focused on taking care of the business of the learning community. Its potential use as a vehicle for collaborative study and research (learning) never really materialized unless that inquiry was about how to do learning communities. In the first meeting all issues except for a discussion of professional development schools focused on community business (time in schools, field experience report, partnerships, cooperating teacher involvement) or class business (topics needing to be addressed, thematic units.) The second meeting seemed dominated by class business (social studies research paper, thematic unit) and also included community business (cooperating teachers concerns). A special discussion about learning through teaching did surface a suggested topic for exploration (longitudinal study of students in different types of clinicals), but nothing was done to pursue this. A request for collaboration at the end also went unanswered. The third meeting continued the pattern with basically two discussions thematic units (class business) and next year's block (community business.) Next year's block became the focus of the final meeting as well.

It is probably not surprising that when we asked students for their concerns, they often focused their attention on their coursework -- particularly what was due next. It probably is not surprising that when we asked cooperating teachers for their concerns, they primarily reflected on carrying out their responsibilities as cooperating teachers. So it should not be surprising, that class business and community business dominated our discussions. Both were probably in need of discussion, but I wondered whether other potential vehicles for discussion may not have existed which would have freed up the learning community meeting time for a different purpose.

When examining the topics discussed, issues related to voice are clarified somewhat. Since some topics were not the joint concerns of all three parties, certain groups probably opted out of the conversation. As the talk turned to cooperating teacher involvement or the structure of next year's block, participating students would have less reason for joining the conversations. Since topics like these often comprised a large proportion of the conversation, it may provide another explanation for why the student voice was not as strong at these meetings.

The meetings worked best when they became focused on joint problem-solving. For example, a concern about time for working with partners to plan thematic units was surfaced by the students. Together it was suggested that a learning community meeting time be set aside and an open workshop be held where students could work with their partners with faculty members present as consultants. Moments like these gave all involved a sense of collaboration and this contributed to a sense of community which may have been more perceived than real but no less valuable for many members who had never experienced either.

What Did They Tell Us?

Hearing Students' Voices

This study has just begun to examine more closely what it is we can learn from listening to the voices of preservice and inservice teachers. In this paper, I can only share a glimpse into what students were telling us based on a closer examination of the April 15, 1994 transcript. While the students surfaced a variety of topics, an interesting conversation developed around Peggy's

concern about only being able to stay out in the schools one week at a time. (Students go out for 4 one-week periods during the semester and return to methods courses in between those weeks.) She suggested that "maybe at least just one time frame during the semester we could be in the schools two weeks at a time."

Bill and Mary agreed with her. When told that the plans were to reduce the four weeks in the school to three weeks, Bill told us, "That stinks." He went on to explain, "I think we'd rather be in the schools where we are actually getting the experience than being in the classrooms, not that the classrooms aren't valuable because they are." He liked the idea of perhaps moving methods courses to the field. He joined in on a discussion of whether students would object to increased contact hours without increased credits. He said they wouldn't. He explained that he thought students would be better off if they could just focus on their clinical experience and explained that students "are angry that you are taking away the thing that I am going to benefit the most from so that I can do this busy work." His comment about busy work was picked up by the professors and later he was on the defensive: "I think I have been misstated. By all means, like I said, the methods courses are extremely valuable ... what we have gained in our methods courses is unbelievable compared to what we have done the last five years of college."

Peggy came to his defense as well. Talking about the room in which the meeting was held which is also the classroom for her methods courses: "I really enjoy walking in here and it gives you a good feeling because it is all our things around ... and its our learning on the walls and it means a tremendous amount." The students ended up agreeing that both the methods courses and clinical experience were valuable experiences and that they would like more time of each.

Students were asked to reflect on their development. Talk returned to thematic units where a discussion about the district's decision to devote an entire week to popcorn was rehashed. (It occurred while the students were in the schools.) The students felt that the week they planned was better than the week where they had to fit lessons into a predetermined topic. Mary further stated that she had a better week because she was "learning a lot more these past weeks ... we've learned a lot that we can really use in the classroom."

When a list of topics generated by creating WINK (What I Need to Know) cards was shared with the groups, the students began to discuss the topic of management. They voiced a need for more information regarding management. When it was suggested that they were taught that in educational psychology, students critically analyzed what and how they had been taught. Ideas of setting up topic-focused lunch sessions and Saturday workshops were surfaced by the students.

Listening to Students' Voices

Someone once asked me, if our students felt too intimidated at our meetings to speak up. This conversation would clearly indicate otherwise. The main message that these students were sending to us is that they really value the field, perhaps above all other experiences. Theory and method divorced from the field is often ignored or forgotten. Activities and exercises that are not obviously applicable to the classroom are seen as interference with what is really important. When something is viewed as connected to their classroom contexts they are even prepared to spend additional and time and energy on it, hence, the context defines what you need to learn -- not the course or the instructor.

As we empower preservice and inservice teachers to become co-contributors to our learning communities, their voices will grow stronger. If we provide them with outlets so that

those voices can be heard, they will expect that the messages they send will be listen to. If we are coming to believe this is a valuable component of the future of our teacher education program. The dilemma becomes how do we honor those voices without losing our own?